



Mobile Misfortune

Vigh, Henrik Erdman

Published in:
Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research

DOI:
[10.3384/cu.2000.1525.1572233](https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.1572233)

Publication date:
2015

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:
[Unspecified](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Vigh, H. E. (2015). Mobile Misfortune. *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 7(2), 233-253.
<https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.1572233>

Mobile Misfortune

By Henrik Vigh

Abstract

This article examines how the emergent cocaine trade in Bissau, the capital of the West African country of Guinea-Bissau, has become entangled with and trickled into the life-worlds, hopes and fears of the city's many impoverished young men. The article is divided into two parts. While the first part looks at the predicament of youth and the hope of migration in Bissau, the second illuminates the anguish of deportation and the despair of being forcefully 'displaced back home'.¹ Following in the footsteps of the young men who navigate the cocaine trade in order to obtain better lives for themselves and their families, it shows how involvement in the cocaine trade is both a curse and a catalyst. Though trading the drug may facilitate migration and mobility, generating social being and worth in the process, it is an activity that is haunted by the threat of deportation and the termination of the mobility it enables. This article thus looks at the motives and manner in which young men in Bissau become caught up in transnational flows of cocaine. It shows how motion is emotionally anchored and affectively bound: tied to and directed toward a feeling of worth and realisation of being, and how migration from the global South may have negative potentiality as an end-point via the ascription of illegality and condition of deportability that shade it.

Keywords: Migration, nullification, deportation, illegality, cocaine

Introduction: Equivocal Catalyst

Justinho had become an unwilling witness to his country's demise long before Guinea-Bissau became infamous for its role in the transnational cocaine trade. Born shortly after the war of independence ended in 1973, he initially grew up in a country characterised by post-independence optimism, full of imaginaries of better times and hopeful prospects (Vigh 2006b). Thirty-three years on, neither Justinho nor Guinea-Bissau had attained even a trace of the good life envisioned. Coming of age in one of the world's most impoverished and unstable countries, his life had been thrown onto socially and economically barren ground. 'This is what we have', Justinho said with resignation, spreading his arms toward the run-down urban scenery: 'a life of poverty' (*vida di pobresa*). The announcement was devoid of nostalgia or sentimentality; instead, it was a pragmatic proclamation of his 'thrownness' (Heidegger 1996: 252), merely stating the stark conditions underlying his being. Justinho and Bissau had developed in tandem, he becoming a disenfranchised young man barely scraping by whilst the country had become poor, globally disconnected and chronically stuck at the bottom of the world's various development indexes (Vigh 2014).

The cocaine connection kicked off in Guinea-Bissau around 2005. Following the many rumours of its presence it soon became clear that the influx of drugs into the small country was not a one-off event but a more concerted and organised development structured by the very top figures in the Guinea-Bissauan government and military elite. Over the following years, this elite transformed the country into a major drug hub (see Vigh 2012) leading the UN to designate Guinea-Bissau 'Africa's first narco state'.² The involvement of senior public figures in the trade and trafficking granted the cartels a high level of immunity in the country and the influx of cocaine and cartel members was evident in the everyday life of Bissau; noticeable in the sudden influx of well-off South Americans, as well as in the new-found wealth of some of the locals involved. Though the situation caused concern when seen from abroad, the young men I speak to embraced it as a medium of possible progress. In the context of disastrous poverty, broken post-colonial imaginaries, and sombre prospects, the cocaine connection was seen as a beacon of hope and interpreted as a long awaited end to the economic and geo-political abandonment of the country.³

Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with young men in Bissau, this article looks at the cocaine trade from within and below. Working in the space between criminology and anthropology, it investigates the cocaine connection from the point of view of some of the young urban men that have become caught up in it, and sheds light on the ways in which flows of cocaine through the small country have become tangled with social life and trickled into the hopes, fears, movement and emotions of the youth I research. The recent increase in the influx of

cocaine to the continent constitutes yet another story of ‘global Africa’ (Ferguson 2006) not merely as abjection but as what we might term ‘a margin in the middle’ (Vigh 2014) that connects three continents and a substantial part of their population in alternative international economic flows (cf. Mbembe 2001:66). When cornered or trapped, people look for available escapes and while transnational organised crime may be seen as a social and security risk by, for example, the UN and EU, it is, as we shall see, perceived as a possible enabler of migration and mobility, generating social being and worth, and imbued with the power to propel people from being ‘no one’ (*ninguin*) to becoming ‘someone’ (*alguin*), by many of the young men I talk to. By navigating the spaces that are undesired or rejected by official geopolitical figurations the trade may provide an escape from poverty, enable migration, and afford livelihoods. Yet the illegality of the substance carries with it a constant risk of termination of the positive emplacement that it is used to facilitate in the first place, making its negative potential stand as a curse via the threat of deportation that mars it as a possibility.

In this manner, the article looks at the intersection between motion and emotion by illuminating the way poverty is socially experienced, structures of power are felt, and the sentiments and actions they stirs up. Rather than merely investigating what emotions are, it investigates what they do (Ahmed 2012:4) and the way they emerge out of and feed into social life.

As a study of emotions this article does not as such take its point of departure in short-lived *sensations*, *moods*, or *affects*, but focuses instead on more prolonged everyday experiences of distress and vulnerability. Emotions are approached as lasting states accompanying social predicaments or conditions, as seen, for example, in the destitution of poverty or the embarrassment of stigma. Due to their protracted marginality young men in Bissau find it difficult to gain a positive position in life and become socially valued and substantiated, resulting in a feeling of worthlessness and incapacity. Yet, while my informants see Guinea-Bissau as a place void of positive social movement, as one coup has followed another and the economic situation has gone from bad to worse, the city has come to encompass alternative kinds of change. The influx of cocaine has generated a flow of migrants, livelihoods, and routes to social mobility that crosscuts the difficult continuities of life in Bissau with moments of hope and horizons of possibility. While the first part of the article looks at the predicament of youth, the anguish of marginality, and hopes of migration in Bissau, the second part thus ties the difficulty of being an impoverished young man in Bissau to the life chances that the cocaine trade represents and, finally, to the desolation of deportation and the despair of being forcefully ‘displaced’ back home due to one’s involvement in it (cf. Peutz 2006). Cocaine, then, is seen as an equivocal catalyst in Bissau. It encompasses the potential for change and escape from the dire poverty and low status that defines many lives in the city, yet it also incorporates the reversal of this positive potential via imprisonment and deportation.

Struggling for Worth

For the young men I work with in Bissau, cocaine thus simultaneously has the potential to provide and terminate possibilities and life chances. However, in a space of negligible possibilities and few positive prospects, the pros outweigh the cons. As Leonido told me in an interview, navigating the cocaine trade was less a choice than a necessity:

You do what is needed (*precisa*). If you can go as a mule (*engolidur*), you go. Clearly! Ask anyone... who wouldn't go? If someone offers, who would refuse? If there is a possibility you go. You must go!

And if you do not go. If you do not go, what happens?

Nothing [he laughs]. Nothing happens, nothing, nothing, nothing! That is the problem. If I stay here, nothing, nothing changes. If you do not go, you will tire your head until you become sick with worry [*preocupasion*]. You must go! This way you can be something more. You can be someone good, someone respected. You understand? Here there is nothing, but if you go, if you succeed, you will see it all (*bu na odja tudo*).

Leonido positions the flow of cocaine in relation to the blockage of social mobility and the societal decline that defines his life in Bissau. The movement of the drug provides mobility and proximity to emotional states other than the abjection of poverty. Because of the difficult social and societal situation, Leonido is willing to do almost anything to get out of the city, including latching on to the cocaine trade that cuts through the small, dilapidated capital and connects it to the underbelly of the wider world. Like many of my other interlocutors he approaches the cocaine trade with cautious optimism, as a potential opening toward a brighter future. The trade provides a rare possibility of moving on positively in life, making it an offer not to be refused. 'Who would hide (*tudji*) from possibility,' he remarked later in the interview.

Leonido's idea of the cocaine trade being a purveyor of positive social emplacement is not uncommon among the young men I do fieldwork with in the city.⁴ Social emplacement, in this perspective, refers to socio-affective embeddedness. Due to the many years of decline, and the collapse of both the state and the economy,⁵ many urban youth in Bissau struggle to survive and positively position themselves in the city. Unable to support themselves, they are primarily seen as burdens, as drains on the already strained resources of social support systems. From this vista of dependency and increasing marginality, the cocaine trade stands out not so much as a criminal and dangerous enterprise but as an offer of mobility and livelihood enabling people to move toward a more valued and worthy social position. Rather than being a negative phenomenon it appears as a conditionally positive one, treasured for the chance it may grant people to actualise their social potential, allowing them to transform latent personhood into active social being. The cocaine trade is in this manner seen as a way of lifting oneself out of the mess

one's life has been thrown into, and as a means of getting away from the city one is stuck in.

'It does not allow you to be a man,' (*i ka na desjau sedu homi*), Amadu said, as he explained what it is like for him to live in Bissau. 'It,' the strangely impersonal entity that he sees as restricting his movement into manhood, refers to the inhospitable social circumstances that his life is set in. 'Bissau is fucked [*fudido*],' he continued, 'even if you struggle till you tire you will never succeed in being somebody.' Amadu's grievance at being unable to reach 'proper' manhood is not an unusual one in a West African context (see Bayart 1993; O'Brien 1996; Richards 1996; Abdullah 1997; Utas 2003; Vigh 2006 [2003]; 2008; Hoffman 2006; 2011). Africa may be *rising*, as it is currently popular to claim,⁶ but it is *polarising*, with some regions and social categories becoming increasingly well-off while others are caught in a seemingly endless cycle of deterioration (Ferguson 1999). Such processes of decline have shown themselves to have a particularly forceful impact on the social position and well-being of young urban men who are ideally supposed to move toward self-sufficiency yet remain thoroughly unable to, because of the economic crisis, and so instead become stuck between social positions, and excluded from – or in a peripheral position to – the social support networks that otherwise constitute the alternative social security system in the country (cf. Mdahavan 2003). In a similar vein, the prolonged state of decline has halted the flow of resources between generations in Bissau and crippled the state's ability to provide alternative routes to social mobility, leaving young people in a situation where they are desperately searching for opportunities and prospects in a city that provides none.

For many urban youth in Bissau the city is, as such, experienced as a space of stagnation and existential truncation (Vigh 2006a). They are forced by circumstance to live, as Amadu mentions above, in a city that nullifies them, in a place of little positive societal, social or personal development. This societal demise generates a barren social landscape where young people are commonly unable to gain social standing and worth. They are incapable of moving into a positive position from which they might play a constructive part in the unfolding of communal life, leaving them abject and ostracised – without valued social being. 'I am someone good, I am not someone bad', Bernardinho told me, as he tried to convince me that his social failings were not ascribable to his person but to the situation at hand. His description of himself as fundamentally 'good' took aim at the negative stereotype he faces as someone who not only finds it difficult to survive but is also unable to participate in social life in an acceptable and anticipated manner.

The terms "acceptable" and "anticipated" refer back to social norms and expectations, and the failure to live up to them generates an intense feeling of deficiency. The experience is one of being unsubstantiated and unrecognised. As a group of people who can barely support themselves, my interlocutors are additionally troubled by the fact that they are ideally supposed to move into a position from

which they can tend to the needs of relatives and relations. As a respectable man (*homi di respieto*) Seku told me, you must ‘work hard (*pega teso*) so that you can help your family.’ Failing to do so means that ‘people will not respect you. They will say that you have no worth (*ka bali*).’ Cultural expectations have not adjusted to social possibilities, leaving these young men in a situation where they survive by feeding off support networks that they ought ideally to be feeding into. For Seku the gendered and generational position of being an *homi di respieto*, a ‘proper’ man, is thus out of reach as it is defined relationally in terms of the ability to support others. ‘If you do not help your family, you are nothing,’ Abdulai similarly told me, as he explained the various ways that one was expected to provide for one’s kin in terms of food, medicine, and clothes. The obligation to give is not, however, limited to kin in Bissau, but is just as important in intimate relationships. Romance, for example, is maintained and communicated via *diniero par ferra*, ‘money for the market,’ an undefined amount given to a woman after sex. This is not to be confused with payment, which is given before sex and would foreclose the relationship by defining it as an act of prostitution. Rather, *dinhiero par ferra* is reciprocal, part of an exchange that serves to consolidate and sustain the connection. *Dinhiero par ferra* does not just direct our attention to the fact that sex is transactional in Bissau, but more generally to the fact that one’s social standing as a man is partly related to one’s generosity and ability to provide.

Not being able to give is a common cause of concern for many young men, just as giving too little will lead to ridicule. In general, the inability to provide resources, relegates men to the category of being poor (*um algin pobre*): to the belittling position of being a ‘boy’ or ‘youth,’ as someone junior, or to being stigmatised as someone who is *riso mon*, ‘hard handed,’ as being stingy is called. Common to all of the above is that they are signs of social incapacity. Being and worth can, as such, be seen as related to the nature of one’s engagement in the ‘economy of affection,’ defined by a cultural imperative of solidarity and provision in relation to the flow of resources. The difficulty of achieving adulthood and become a respected man is directly related to the fact of being unable to engage positively and constructively in social relations, as a capacity rather than a constraint, clarifying the very social and emotive embeddedness of mobility and economic aspirations. In this respect, engagement in the cocaine trade may be directly linked to ‘the ethics of illegality’ (Roitman 2006), where what is gained is not just individual status but the ability to support kith and kin, making the ‘illicit’ or ‘illegal’ a moral act in its own right. The people I talk to are aware of the risks involved in the cocaine trade but find themselves obliged to engage in it as it may generate better lives and futures for their family and friends and so position them as a valued node in a larger network.

Migration and concomitant remittances reveal the global reach of the economy of affection. Yet, the economy of affection (Hydén 1983) is not merely a redistribution of resources along lines of solidarity and care. It is tied, as seen above, to

gendered and generational expectations. As a 'man' is obliged to contribute to it in certain ways over time, the connection between affection and provision has a normative dimension to it. It is, in other words, not just an economy of affection but equally one of *obligation*, making it, at times, a burden of provision. In order to be considered a proper man, as Seku says in the above, one has to occupy a position from which it is possible to support relatives and connections. The quote emphasises his desire to gain social being and worth, yet it also clarifies the vulnerability of this type of masculinity, as the very weight of expectations placed upon young men causes everyday life be experienced as a burden, and one's failure to provide to be felt as an attack on one's manliness and gendered status (Cohen-Mor 2013:173).

'Who Wants you when you are Nothing'?

Though normally approached as a warm and gentle alternative to the cold, mechanical dynamics of the market economy, the economy of affection can, as such, pack a nasty social punch. Being unable to meet expectations and obligations generates an everyday punctuated by nullification, the experience of being reduced to 'being nobody', a body without worth defined by its social 'hollowness' (cf. Berman 2006, 20). Nullification is, in this perspective, not to be understood as an analytical reduction, a bracketing out of the actual world in order to arrive at the phenomenological (cf. Husserl 1913/2012), but rather as an experience of being bracketed out, and having to temporally bracket out the social conventions that one is unable to fulfil. 'I walk between stoves [*fugon*],' Amadu said, as he was explaining how he survives on a daily basis. Walking between stoves was Amadu's way of trying to spread out the burden of his presence. He moves between his father's, aunts', uncles', and sisters' houses, asking for food in order not to be such a drain on any single household that they might be forced to deny him meals or favours. 'Even if you do not want to, you must beg for food (*pidi semoula*). You feel shame, but you have to,' he said.

As a person that ought ideally to be able to contribute to the *fugon*, Amadu encounters his lack of status in the very practicalities of surviving. The schism between being expected to fend for oneself, yet being stuck in a situation where one is dependent on hand-outs and donations in order to make it through the day results in an experience of social incapacity. It generates an inability to achieve worthy being within the economy of affection and a concomitant relegation to the category of youth as an unsubstantiated adult. Man longs for completion and is haunted by the lack of it, Sartre states (1956), yet this longing is, at times, merely directed at having positive presence rather than elevated goals and prominent positions. When I ask young men in Bissau about their imagined futures, and what they envisage themselves becoming, the answer often starts, as we saw above, with a default 'somebody' (*um align*), a concept which, in all its vagueness, is

defined merely by being a valued part of the social body. When they further clarify what ‘being somebody’ actually entails, they often qualify the term with adjectives such as ‘good’ or ‘respected,’ as positions that are described by their positive emplacement within a relational and normative landscape, defined by what one is able to be for others. The point may be banal, but it not only indicates an aspiration that guides my informants’ actions but also directs our attention to their current experience of being the opposite. ‘Who wants you when you are nothing,’ Seku asked me rhetorically, as an ironic comment on the endless boasting and description of sexual escapades that otherwise often characterises the conversation among the group of young men we would hang out with. For the young men I talk to in Bissau, their life situations are frequently defined by a sense of nullification, a feeling of being no one and nothing, as their marginality positions them as people ‘whose words and actions have no place in the life of the collectivity’ (Jackson 2012:172) and are unheard and unqualified.

It comes as no surprise that people, when their lives are thrown into such socially barren circumstances, attempt to escape their predicament and move into spaces of possibility from which they may further their lives in a constructive way. Though people may not always have a clear idea of where they are going most of us have very clear ideas of what we wish to escape or avoid, and the young men I talk to remain attentive to any change that might allow them to get away from their socio-generational impasse and gain momentum in life. I have, in my earlier work, focussed on how war can provide people with just such a possibility, as it opens up otherwise closed networks and political structures and enables youths to navigate networks and events (Vigh 2006). Yet, currently, as Bissau has settled into an anxious and insecure period of peace, the intersection between migration and cocaine connections has replaced mobilisation as the perceived primary catalyst of social being, granting motion and escape to the destitute and desperate.

Ki Kussa di Cocaina

‘All those people building houses. You see them? If you see a brutally big car (*bruta di carro*) then you know that the owner went and found his money there [in the cocaine business].’ Dario told me. Dario unapologetically admired people who had managed to make money through the cocaine trade. Living in a small annex, stuck on to his mother’s equally small adobe house, the sudden wealth of people who used to be as poor as him represented an almost mystical rise to fame. Dario’s house was a difficult place to visit and one I sometimes deliberately avoided. The household was poor, even by Bissauan standards, with excrement and old food littering the small dirt courtyard behind it, and his sister’s young child crawling around in the shit. Now in his thirties, Dario longed for another place to live, yet with no resources and no likely way of getting them, he had to make do with this shanty-like shelter. From his perspective, the cocaine connection offered a

way out of poverty, visible in the new cars being imported and houses built. Bissau is falling apart, *darna-darna tudo*, people say, yet the wider decline has, over the last ten years, been punctuated with newly built haciendas publicising the potential profits of the illegal trade.

Most of the cocaine that passes through Guinea-Bissau is strictly in transit, as the property of Columbian and Peruvian cartels. But not all of the cocaine that enters the country leaves it again straight away. The primary means of payment within the cocaine industry is, unsurprisingly, cocaine, and services provided to cartels, in relation to the large-scale movement of drugs, are paid in drugs rather than money. Local middlemen and influential facilitators of the trafficking in Guinea-Bissau are, as such, paid in minor quantities of the goods they protect or transport, creating a smaller yet substantial flow of cocaine into Guinea-Bissauan patrimonial networks. The larger shipments of cocaine that have been intercepted moving out from Bissau are not then cocaine that is in Guinean hands but belong to the cartels as goods *en route*. Conversely, the many instances of smaller amounts of cocaine, intercepted as mules seek to traffic them through airports and seaports, may very well stem from Guinea-Bissauan networks trying to move the rewards gained from facilitating the cartels' business into areas where cocaine can actually make a proper profit, as people are too poor to pay properly for it in Bissau. In short, the larger scale flows create a secondary flow of smaller quantities of cocaine, which travel through local networks and diasporas, connecting places, moving illicit and illegal goods through a dispersed and complex web of relationships, and along different routes and points of distribution. If we look more specifically at the movement of cocaine through the local networks in question, we see that they trickle through patrimonial networks and into the economy of affection in much the same way that resources generally move from big-men and patrons to clients. Entering into the exchange of resources and possibilities for loyalties and services, and into emotive ties. As such, the cocaine trade seems currently to be strengthening existing patrimonial networks in the city by supplying an input of goods into social arrangements that were otherwise running low.

Though the trade has caused alarm in the UN, and various international law-enforcement agencies, the people I spend my time with in Bissau have, as we have seen, met it with optimism. As Dario indicates, in the above quotation, the cocaine connection was seen as opening up closed horizons. Eliseu similarly mentioned the growing cocaine trade in Bissau as a possibility of obtaining a better life. When I interviewed him in 2006, he told me about the potentially positive prospects that cocaine could bring about:

People thought that it [i.e. the situation in Bissau] would get better. All of us we thought that it would get better, but nothing. Now, God willing, it will rise a bit.

What is going to rise?

Since the big-man [Nino Vieira] came back it will rise. Only he can build Bissau.

How will he do that? What will he do?

If he puts this cocaine thing (*ki kussa di cocaina*)... If he puts it to use in building the country we can rise. He can build the land. People think; 'this big man he will help people. He will help us. If you have nothing he will give you something. Us, we look up to him, so he will help us. If you need a job he will give you one. Even if you want to go abroad it is possible.

The cocaine trade has not, of course, alleviated local poverty, yet it has had an interesting impact on the group of people I work with, as it has ensured a steady flow of income into the patrimonial networks that make up the political structures in the city, and thus made it possible for them to reconnect to the formations they would otherwise have been cut off from due to lack of resources.

Cocaine was seen as opening up an avenue of mobility as it is imagined as enabling a move toward brighter horizons. It offers, in this respect, both social becoming and livelihoods, locally as well as through the possibility of migration, and translates into life chances and future social being. It stands as a substance that holds the possibility of enabling young men to validate themselves socially, making the drug a possible stepping-stone to gaining social worth and recognition. The figure of the mule and migrant conflate, as do motion and emotion, as the possibility of remittances grants the cocaine migrant a positive presence within the social configurations he leaves behind.

Momentum and Direction

That idea that cocaine provides the possibility of migration is not completely illusory. The ease with which one can gain social being by navigating the cocaine trade may be overstated – at least in relation to the limited number of people I know who have actually made it into Europe as mules – but it does happen and this spurs a potent mix of information and rumours. Similarly, in local and international news, an array of more or less reliable stories of organised trafficking, mixing both truth and fiction, have contributed to the idea. However, even if we leave the rumours aside, there actually has been couriers, and 'shotgun' trafficking with groups of mules being dispatched,⁷ meaning that cocaine has acquired an almost mythical status as both fantasy and actual possibility of migration for marginal youths. It represents a chance of obtaining the documents, airfare and income that are otherwise inaccessible. In Iko's words:

Now there is cocaine everything is possible, everything. If you have cocaine you bring it to Europe and you will be rich, rich. You do not even need a lot. Here you can buy a kilo of cocaine for 7000 euro, 9000, 8000. You bring it to Spain and you see a lot [of money], really, a lot.

Or more realistically by Denilson, as he comments on the mules, *engolidurs*, that manage to make a trip to Europe by trafficking drugs:

When this cocaine thing started to come, many people went to Europe. You swallow (*engoli*) it you see, and when you come to Europe you go to the toilet [he laughs]. If you are lucky, they give you a ticket, passport and send you to Dakar, then you take the plane again from there.

Denilson generally spoke of cocaine, and the possibility it brought with it, in pragmatic and factual ways. He did not emphasise or dwell on its illicitness but referred to it in terms of the life chances and social possibilities it encompassed. The trade, and the involvement of senior military and political figures, is, similarly, broadly accepted. The people I spend my time with see it as a necessary and understandable arrangement, when one takes the overall situation of the country into consideration. Instead of condemning the drugs, they see them as a means to an end: an opportunity rather than illegality.

Kadakin na busca si caminho, 'everyone is looking for his road,' people will often say when talking about attempts to smuggle cocaine into Europe. The word *caminho*, 'road', in itself indicates a practical rather than a normative evaluation. The concept is used as a metaphor for navigable connections and trajectories. It defines an opening or possible line of flight out of a difficult situation and is, thus, used to indicate directionality or opportunity. Interestingly, the concept is often used together with the concept of *trampoline di vida*, life's trampoline, referring to points or positions from which one can gain momentum; that is, pick up the speed necessary to move socially and/or physically. Taken together the two concepts refer then to the 'direction' and 'momentum' needed to escape the negative circumstances that define the present.

In Bissau there is good weather, women, everything is good, [it is] just that there is no work. If there were work then everyone would stay here. No one would go anywhere...

Where do people go?

Mandjakos go to France. Fula, Mandinga go to Spain. They do not have a future here. If you do not have money who is going to help you? Most young people here wash cars. I wash cars sometimes – I am 36, but I wash cars too. In the beginning you do till 7th grade [in school], but then you just sit till you get tired, if you do not have someone to bring you... Here there are only two trampolines in life (*trapolina di vida*). The first trampoline is the drugs thing (*kussa di droga*). The second trampoline is sports, you see. (Denilson)

In other words, the Bissauan social environment is seen as offering so little in terms of social possibilities that cocaine connections have become one of the only ways of acquiring momentum in life and escaping the existential truncation that characterises the present. 'This cocaine is just a life trampoline, just a life trampoline' Kio told me, going on to state that in fact 'it is the biggest trampoline there is (*ki la i trapolina mas garandi ki ten*). If you know someone who trusts you, you can see a ticket and all (*bu na odja billhete e tudo*)'. Due to their difficult social situation, the experience of nullification and the stigma of being a burden on the affective circuits in relation to which they are actually expected to be a resource,

the trade is valued for the chance it can grant people to actualise latent personhood. As Bernardinho told me, directly addressing the social obligation to migrate in order to meet expectations of provision:

If she needs a thing where will he [her boyfriend] see [get] it? If you do not give her it, where will she see it? It is the same with marriage . . . That is why marriage has nearly stopped in Africa. You can know a woman ten years, but you will never have enough money to marry her. To be a respectable man you need to marry. If you are not married you will not have respect in society. It is the same thing with work. If you have work you can organize your life, you can get married, and afterwards you can start a family . . . But only someone who knows you . . . Only someone who knows you will give you a job . . . These days, young people are frustrated. It is this that makes young people want to leave, so you can have a standard of living. You go there [abroad] and then you can send money to your family . . . But it is sad, because you are far from each other. It is difficult. Africans have difficult lives.

The tragedy is that one needs to be physically distant in order to be socially present. To gain valued social being, young men, as Sarah Pink so poetically puts it, ‘strive to attain what is most treasured in Bissau, namely absence: the empty space left by migration’ (2001: 103). And cocaine currently provides both the *caminho* and *trampolina* enabling people to achieve this meta-state of absent presence.

Roads and trampolines, as such, refer not just to movement out of Bissau but equally to a move into place **in** Bissau through the status acquired by becoming a figure who is potentially able to support kin and friends via remittances (see Stark 1988; Taylor 1989; Adams 2003). This is not to imply that Bissau is seen as without value, but rather that social value is seen as dormant within the city. Just as the true value of cocaine is only realisable elsewhere, so the actual value of young men is currently dependent on moving out of Bissau for it to be actualised, making Bissau appear as a space of latency.

Cocaine as Livelihood

However, because worthy social being is so difficult to attain in Bissau, cocaine connections also transform the hope of social becoming into fear of ‘social unbecoming.’ The possibility of losing one’s newly found positive social emplacement by being forcefully removed and sent back, is a constant underlying factor for the people I talk to who have actually made it to Europe. It is a fear of the social *déroute* that lies in being pulled back to a position of subordination and dormancy of being. Being deported is to be *déclassé*, to experience free fall through hierarchies of social value. Furthermore, as the deported migrant is often the sole – or primary – provider for a group of people, deportation can have dire consequences for whole networks within the configurations in question (see Lucht 2011; Drotbohm 2014).

The threat of deportation is made ever-present by the part cocaine plays as livelihood for some of the Guinea-Bissauan migrants who are currently in Europe. As

the economic crisis has taken its toll and the level of unemployment has soared in Southern Europe, jobs are becoming increasingly hard to find for irregular or undocumented migrants: their illegal status blocks their possibilities of employment. In other words, for those involved, the cocaine trade may provide both one of their only possibilities for migration out of Bissau, as well as one of the few ways of gaining an income when actually in Europe: for some, migration is made possible by smuggling the drug into Europe; for many more, cocaine currently makes life possible when actually there. Not as a choice but as a necessity.

‘It was the only job I could get’, Seku told me, as I was trying to interview him whilst he was working hard to push a few grams of cocaine in a *barrio* of Lisbon. Most of the young men I have followed from Bissau to Lisbon and Paris dream of getting good jobs, recognition and the ability to live a worthy life, but within their sphere of possibility cocaine is, similarly to Bissau, treated as a legitimate point of departure. In an almost neo-Clausewitzian mode, the trade is seen as a ‘continuation of business by other means’ (Williams 2002: 164). ‘I don’t force anyone to buy it’,Americano said, while we were standing in an alley from where he pushes cocaine to local and occasional tourists. ‘I don’t put my hand in your pocket, I don’t steal, I don’t hurt people’, he continued, explaining to me that selling cocaine was merely another form of ‘commerce’ (*commercio so*).

Similarly, Latino, another Bissauan pusher, situated his line of work with the words: ‘go over there (points to a bar) and you can buy beer, go over there and you can buy cigarettes; here you can buy cocaine’. In Latino’s opinion, he was working within the boundaries of a capitalist society rather than outside it. Furthermore, the current financial crisis is seen as so severe, in relation to West African migrants in Europe, that selling cocaine is understood as one of the few ways that you will be able to send back remittances. In fact, the trade, and involvement of Guinea-Bissauan networks,⁸ is currently seen as so consolidated that even prospective migrants in Bissau now take the trafficking and pushing of cocaine into consideration if they should be successful in moving out of the city. ‘If you go to Spain’, Alou, a hopeful would-be migrant, explained to me in Bissau, ‘you can just as well tell your family you’re selling drugs straightaway’.

The problem is, of course, that the states my informants have made their way into, do not share this pragmatic attitude toward drugs, nor to their illegal entry, and so drug-related crime often leads to deportation. Where many EU states may take a pragmatic view of the illegal status of migrants, they take a quite different stance towards the illegality of their trade.

What happens if they catch you [as undocumented]?

It depends. They can take you or let you be.

If they take you?

They take you. You are there – and they ask you questions: ‘you are from where, you live where, what do you do?’ They beat you, they hit you (*dau ku*) with a fist (*suko*), or they slap you (*bofado*). They are bad. It is like this.

So they let you go?

Depends. If you did not do anything they beat you. But if they catch you, if you are selling things and they catch you, you end up with problems, they deport you. If you go to jail, you will be deported (Americano)

Being caught without papers may land you in detention while the authorities check your identity. It may also lead to abuse. But it normally means being released again a few hours or days later. Being caught with cocaine means going to jail and eventually being deported.

Deportation as *Déroute*

For the migrants that are involved in the drugs trade, in some way or another, lives are thus lived ‘through a palpable sense of deportability’ (de Genova 2002: 439; cf. Reeves 2010; Mutsaers 2014). Having followed my informants to Europe since 2005, I am currently in the situation where I have started following them back again, and the group of people who has been forcefully removed seems to be growing at a rapid pace to the point where, currently, being a deportee, *deportado*, is becoming a social category in its own right in the city.

There are then increasing numbers of young men who have been sent back because of criminal behaviour, a great deal of which is related to the selling or trafficking of cocaine. Denilson was one of them. I interviewed him a couple of months after he had been deported back to Bissau and he described a process of migration and deportation that was similar to many other such histories that I was to hear:

I took the plane directly to London. I took a big risk. I went with someone else’s passport. He was [a] black [person like me] so I just went and I managed, it was another black. God helped me [to have a] life in London... I had money but I did not have documents. I went with someone else’s passport but he is black like me. In England I sold cocaine. I sold so much cocaine and ecstasy. I had many good customers. If you called me in the night I would get on my bike and go... and one gram (*ngalla*), two grams. No problem. In England there is a lot of cocaine. I was caught. I had cocaine and I had CF-gas in my pocket. They caught me and sent me straight to prison, Croyden Prison [?], and I came back to Bissau (Denilson)

Being caught with cocaine is a common deportee story. Together with violent behaviour it is the most common explanation for being forcefully returned home. As Garandi pointed out:

If they catch you and you have cocaine, then that is certain deportation (*deportason certo*). You go to the court and they put you on an airplane. Afterwards you will be in Bissau without anything. You go to build a palace (*kompu palição*) [build a house back home] and you come back with nothing (Garandi)

‘Coming back with nothing’ is deeply stigmatising; a sign of failure; of not having made it despite everything being laid out in front of you. As Dario told me, ‘a lot of the deported are ashamed. Everyone who migrates wants to come home with a

good life. People will say [if someone is deported] “this one left but came back with nothing””.

Though both Garandi and Denilson come across as somewhat blasé about their deportation, they are in fact struggling to find the money or an opportunity that will enable them to leave again, as being deported is considered both regressive and embarrassing, once again not because of the illegal trade but because of the wasted possibility and *declassément* involved. Being deported most often means losing your ability to contribute positively to the affective circuit involved, and thus entails a move into an even more pronounced sense of nullification. Coming back to Bissau is fine, but only if one does not lose the possibility of providing.

If you are deported you will tell people: ‘no, I just came for holidays’, or you will say ‘no, I came doing business. You say: ‘I came to look for papers... family things’ but after a while, if you are still here people will know you are deported. Buba [a friend] he tells people, no [I am not]! But people know, everyone knows

The cocaine trade is, as such, as treacherous as it is tempting. The successful pusher or trafficker, who is able to send back remittances, is seen as a valuable social figure and a resource for his social network in Bissau. The migrant who has been deported due to involvement in the cocaine trade, is, however, seen as a failure – a social burden. The shadow side of the cocaine trade, for the young men involved is that deportation stands as a fracturing of possibility, a dissolution of provision, and negative social repositioning. Deportees are not just physically removed but existentially displaced – forced by circumstance to live in the ruins of their former potential and value within the economy of affection. It is a process of social dislocation.

Só André

The stigma is one of losing the social being and position that people strive so hard to attain. I have known André since I first came to Bissau. Initially a poor militiaman he later became a leading figure among a group of inner city youth thanks to connections from his time in the Aguentas militia, and was considered a bright and trustworthy young man by the remnants of the ousted political network connected to the former President Nino Vieira. After his side lost the war in 1999 he transformed himself into a small patron – a little big man – in his own right, and in 2006 he had managed to amass a kilo (*um cabeça*) of cocaine by providing services to people higher up in the cocaine connected network (see Vigh 2009b; 2012). Yet as cocaine is too expensive a commodity for the average citizen in Bissau to be able to afford it, the drug – much as the young men I work with in the city – only has potential value in Bissau and, like them, it must be moved to Europe to truly realise its worth. For André, his kilo provided a chance to get out of Bissau and move into a space of actualisation, which meant that he boarded a plane, with a couple of others, seeking to smuggle his cocaine into Portugal. For

ethical reasons, I cannot describe in detail the way he sought to get his hard earned commodity into Portugal, as his unusual way of going about it would reveal his identity, but what matters is that despite all his precautions, he was caught going through customs and sentenced to jail for a handful of years, of which he served a few and was subsequently deported.

I tried to visit him in Lisbon when he was in jail, but he refused to talk to me. When I managed to meet up with him again in Bissau in 2010 he was welcoming, but a shadow of himself. Hanging out with him, and the group of people for whom he used to provide patronage, it was clear that his social standing was lost and his status deflated. 'I am trying to get documents', he told me, 'that is the only thing you can do, just to get new documents', he continued. As personal documents can be bought in Bissau, he was starting from scratch, literally, with a new birth certificate. Yet, the remaking of an identity through documents was homologous to the remaking of subjectivity that he had to do so in social terms. Instead of being a figure of respect, with social worth and value, André's position as a deportee made him a figure of failure, someone to ridicule rather than respect. *Ba* André, *Só* André, Raul mockingly called him, using terms of respect to ironically highlight his *déroute*, *Ba* being the Mandinga prefix for a person of status and *Só* the Creole equivalent. Raul was, as such, mocking his deflated status and ridiculing the social unbecoming caused by his loss of positive presence in the economy of affection. Though André's situation was evidently an undesirable one, he actually managed better than most of the other people I have met up with in Bissau after they were deported. Being back in Bissau he had to live in the ruins of the life he had sought to escape, yet his way of doing so was through a process of rebuilding that, at least, held out some hope. For others, it is clear that the estrangement involved in having to re-inhabit the remnants of a position they thought they had escaped can be a far more destructive experience (Peutz 2006; cf. Schustser & Majidi 2014).

I first met Justinho back in 2000. He was a constantly sick, skinny young man with a nasty cough. 'He has the prostitutes disease' (*douenza di putas*, i.e. AIDS), people said of him then, yet when we met up ten years later his affliction seemed mental rather than physical. As we spoke about the last ten years, he recounted a story of migration and deportation. During the interview he looked down, spoke in a low voice and in short sentences told me:

The police took me. I had cocaine and I was caught. It is like this.

After [that] what happened?

I went to the courtroom and I went to Bissau.

What happened?

I was cursed. Things from the earth, you know, Africans are powerful. I was cursed and I did not know what was happening. I did not sleep, nothing. They gave me medicine and put me on the plane. I did not know what was happening. When I

came to Bissau my friend took me to the church of the Nigerians [Pentecostal church].

The story of losing one's luck due to curses and the envy of others back home runs through a number of the interviews I conducted, as does the sense of estrangement and of losing one's direction, perhaps most clearly noticeable in the following interview with Tó:

They put me in jail. They caught me and sent me to jail. I was there 2 years three years and I said; 'send me back this is no good'. When I came back... I did not want to go out. In the evening it was too dark. I was scared. When I ask after people of my generation half of them have died. The other half live in Europe. Half of them have died. Look at this. We live in shit. The place is dirty; peoples' toilets [?], rubbish everywhere, virus, bacteria. I am scared of living here, Honestly, I am scared. Hepatitis, bacteria. People die, and then when people die they call it things from the earth, things from the spirits (*problema di terra, kussa di iran*) and then they start buying things to make it better for the spirits (*iran*) but they just make it worse for themselves. Sometimes I smoke to control my nerves. I get nervous. This place it makes you angry, you understand (Tó)

Tó's statement communicates despair, yet it also tells a story of an estrangement of such force that it becomes almost crippling. Deportation, for Tó, means having become foreign to the place that is home. Though he is 'back home', his sudden deportation signalled a move not just into a place but also a social position that is no longer familiar to him.

I was on the plane with Tó to Lisbon just a few years before the above interview was conducted. Knowing that he was making his way into Europe with a false passport and illegal substances, I booked a return flight to Copenhagen, via Lisbon, on the same plane and stood in the queue watching as he made his way through customs in the Portuguese capital. As he was stood in line, going through customs, he turned increasingly grey and anaemic with every step he took. By the time he was about to hand his passport to the customs official he looked feeble, with his hand shaking so visibly that I was sure he would be taken aside for further questioning. The customs official hardly noticed him, looked briefly at his passport without looking up, and waved him through. As I cleared customs Tó was waiting in the baggage hall, his colour returned, he smilingly said goodbye and walked out of the airport. He was to make a name for himself among the Guinea-Bissauans in Europe as a person who knew his way around the shadier sides of European society. He had a mother and two siblings in Bissau, who were dependent on him, and though he made his money selling drugs, he was spoken of as a person of respect.

The estrangement that is so present in his narrative does not then relate to the time he has been away, but to the loss of place experienced in being sent back home. Being deported was an experience of displacement; an act of involuntary mobility with negative social, economic and existential implications. So, though he was ironically displaced back home, it was still an act of uprooting, the unfamiliarity of his new position in Bissau being evident in what he said. The irony of

being socially and economically uprooted by being moved back home counters our ideas of dwelling and place, yet the very fact that deportation is akin to displacement clarifies the fact that emplacement itself is defined in relation to notions of social being and worth, rather than place and recognisability, tied directly to motion and emotion in terms of mobility and the striving for relational substantiation.

Conclusion

This article has looked at the way poverty is lived and power is felt in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. It has shown how young men in the city are trapped in a social position of little worth and minor value, and has tried to clarify the emotions this evokes and the attempted motion it educes. Rather than dwelling on fleeting feelings of sensations or transient affects it has thus dwelled on the more persistent sentiments generated by precarity and political marginality and shown how these are tied to migration as an attempted escape and move towards a positive social emplacement. Marred by prolonged conflict and economic decline, the life situation has become desolate for many young men in Bissau. As a space of minimal resources and rampant decay, the city has come to offer very little in terms of life chances and social trajectories for the myriad young men that inhabit it. Negative economic development and recurring conflictual turmoil has rendered it impossible for them to contribute to social networks and figure positively within social relations. As the article has shown, the experience of being stuck in a position of poverty, within a landscape of decline, is countered by an attempt to gain motion, physical and/or social, by aligning oneself with cocaine connected contacts and networks. In order to gain positive social being, migration (cocaine driven or otherwise) stands as a move into a space of possibility. It is seen as the possibility of realising one's potential by being able to send back remittances and, thus, move from a position of reciprocal marginality to one of centrality: By migrating, young men may thus gain social worth and value. They become physically displaced in order to become socially emplaced, as being abroad grants social presence at home. In this perspective Europe does not constitute an end in itself. Instead of being the primary space for my informants' existence it appears to provide the social 'backstage' for their being in Bissau, enabling them to socially substantiate themselves and engage positively in the relations of affection that define them.

Henrik Vigh is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen. He has researched issues of youth and conflict in both Europe and Africa and written extensively on issues of social crisis, militant organisations, trans-national organised crime, migration, and mobilisation. E-mail: hv@anthro.ku.dk.

Notes

¹ The article builds on a conference paper, entitled 'displaced back home,' presented at the ECAS conference in Uppsala, Sweden 2012

² <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/newrels/organized-crime.html>

³ From 2005 to 2009 alone, 46 tons of cocaine are said to have passed through Guinea-Bissau: <http://www.african-bulletin.com/watch/848-the-scurge-of-drug-trafficking-in-guinea-bissau-.html>. The value of the drug trade in Bissau is currently higher than the country's GNP. For an economy in which 80% of the official revenue comes from development assistance, however, this may not be much. Yet, the point is that the cocaine business and the subsequent flows of money it feeds into the country have become primary sources of income for groups like the police, military and navy, who are otherwise paid irregularly if at all and feed off the country's population in order to gain an income.

⁴ Bissau is the capital of the small, West African country of Guinea-Bissau.

⁵ The last couple of decades in Guinea-Bissau have been economically catastrophic. The country had already seen a rapid decline in development assistance prior to the war in 1999, from 180 million US dollars in 1996 to 124 million in 1997, yet during the war this was further reduced: to 96 million in 1998 and a mere 52 million in 1999 (Einarsdottir 2007: 102). A cut in state budgets by more than two-thirds within three years is drastic in any circumstances. But the terrible effects of the cuts were heightened by the fact that 80% of the state budget stems from development assistance; the economic situation was further aggravated by a 50% drop in the international prices of the country's largest export crop, cashew nuts, in 2000, and subsequent negative fluctuations in the market over the last ten years

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2012/jan/19/africa-rising-above-aid-dependency>; <http://www.economist.com/node/21541015>

⁷ http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/wdr07/WDR_2007.pdf;

http://www.cfr.org/publication/13750/in_west_africa_threat_of_narcostates.html

⁸ http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/West_Africa_Report_2009.pdf

References

- Abdullah, Ibrahim (1997): 'Bush Path to Destruction: the origin and character of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF/SL)', *Africa Development*, 22:3-4, 45-76.
- Adams, Richard (2003): 'International migration, remittances, and the brain drain', *Policy Research Working Paper* 3069.
- Ahmed, Sara (2004/2013): *The cultural politics of emotion*. New York: Routledge.
- Andersson, Ruben (2014): Hunter and Prey: Patrolling Clandestine Migration in the Euro-African Borderlands. *Anthropological Quarterly* vol. 87(1), 119-149.
- Bayard, Jean-François (1993): *The State in Africa: the politics of the belly*. London: Longman
- Berman, Morris (2006): Coming to Our Senses. In *Global Aesthetics*, ed. J. E. Jacobs. Decatur: Millikin University
- Cohen-Mor, Dalya (2013): *Fathers and Sons in the Arab Middle East*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Drotbohm, Heike (2014): 'The Reversal of Migratory Family Lives: A Cape Verdean Perspective on Gender and Sociality pre- and post-deportation', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41:4, 653-670
- Ferguson, James (1999): *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Copperbelt*. Los Angeles: Uni. of California Press.
- Ferguson, James (2006): *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*, Durham: Duke

- University Press.
- de Genova, Nicholas P. (2002): “‘Migrant illegality’ and deportability in everyday life’, *Annual review of Anthropology*, 419-447
- Goffman, Erving (1959): *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor
- Fortes, Meyer (1984): ‘Age, Generation, and Social Structure’, D. E. Kertzer & J. Kieth (eds): *Age and Anthropological Theory*, London: Ichaca.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time: A translation of Sein und Zeit*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Hoffman, Danny (2006): ‘Disagreement: dissent politics and the war in Sierra Leone’, *Africa Today* 52:3, 3-22
- Hoffman, Danny (2011): *The war machines: Young men and violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, Durham: Duke University Press,
- Husserl, Edmund (1913/2012): *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* London: Routledge.
- Hydén, Göran (1983): *No Shortcuts to Progress*, London: Heinemann Educational.
- Jackson, M. (2012): *Lifeworlds: Essays in existential anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meillassoux, Claude (1978/1981): *Maidens, Meal and Money: capitalism and the domestic community*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Lucht, Hans (2011): *Darkness before daybreak: African migrants living on the margins in Southern Italy today*, Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Mbembe, Achilles (2001): *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Mutsaers, Paul (2014): ‘An Ethnographic Study of the Policing of Internal Borders in the Netherlands Synergies Between Criminology and Anthropology’, *British Journal of Criminology* 54:6.
- O’Brien, Donald B. C. (1996): ‘A Lost Generation? Youth, Identity and State Decay in West Africa’, R. P. Werbner, R. P. & T. O. Ranger (eds): *Postcolonial identities in Africa*, London: Zed Books
- Peutz, Nathalie (2006): ‘Embarking on an Anthropology of Removal’ *Current Anthropology*, 47:2, 217-241.
- Reeves, Madeleine (2010): *On Edge: Tools for an Anthropology of Precarity*, 6th Annual Conference: The Social Life Of Methods, 31 August-3 September, St Hugh’s College Oxford
- Richards, Paul (1995): ‘Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone: a crisis of youth?’, O. Furley (ed): *Conflict in Africa*, London: Tauris Academic Publishers
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (1956): *Being and Nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*, New York: Philosophical Library.
- Schuster, Liza & Majidi, Nassim (2015): Deportation Stigma and Re-migration, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41:4, 635-652
- Utas, Mats (2003): *Sweet Battlefields: youth and the Liberian civil war*, Uppsala: Uppsala University Dissertations in Cultural Anthropology.
- Williams, Phil (2002): Transnational organized crime and the state. *Cambridge studies in international relations*, 85, 161-182.
- Vigh, Henrik (2003/2006): *Navigating terrains of war: Youth and soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*, Oxford: Berghahn books.
- Vigh, Henrik (2006b): ‘The colour of destruction: On racialization, geno-globality and the social imaginary in Bissau’, *Anthropological Theory*, 6:4, 481–500.
- (2008): ‘Crisis and chronicity: Anthropological perspectives on continuous conflict and decline’, *Ethnos* 73:1, 5-24.
- (2009): ‘Wayward migration: on imagined futures and technological voids’, *Ethnos* 74:1, 91-109.
- (2009b): ‘Conflictual motion and political inertia: On rebellions and revolutions in Bissau and beyond’, *African Studies Review*, 52:2, 143-164.
- (2012): ‘Critical States and Cocaine Connections’, Mats Utas (ed): *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*, Zed Books: London.

----- (2014): La Marge au Centre: sur les réseaux, la cocaïne et le crime transnational à Bissau, *Socio*, 1:3, 289-313.